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MARCONCINI'S *L' INDUSTRIA DOMESTICA SALARIATA* ¹

"The Sweating System ² and the Minimum Wage Law" should be the English title for this book. And the author's central thought can be condensed within a single sentence. The sweating system, or wage labor in the home, is a great and widely spread evil throughout the world; and no other remedy can be as effective and as prompt as the minimum wage law.

Of the six formal *parts* into which the whole book is divided one (11-38) treats of wage labor in the home in the development of the forms of production, a second (39-154) treats of the extent of wage labor in the home, a third (155-285), of present conditions of wage labor in the home, a fourth (286-325), of the causes of the evils, and a fifth (326-778), of remedies. Then follow (780-847) appendices giving texts of bills, bibliographies, and an elaborate analytical table of contents. Each of the six parts is divided in its turn and with careful discrimination. Thus the part which treats of present conditions has eight chapters, on wages (155-197), living expenses (197-203), hours of labor (203-212), environment of labor (212-224), hygiene in relation to the worker (224-247), hygiene in relation to the workers' families (247-259), hygiene in relation to the public health (259-268), and the question of morals (268-285). And the chapters have their sections, and the sections have their sub-sections. For the most part, all is in admirably logical arrangement.

In a general way, the range and nature of the expositions and discussions of parts two and three, perhaps also of parts one and four, can be taken as matters of course. The author believes wage labor in the home to be an entirely natural form

¹ *L'industria domestica salariata nei rapporti interni e internazionali*. Federico Marconcini. Con prefazione di Achille Loria. Pp. 847. F. Bertinatti, Torino, 1914. L. 12.50.

² In fairness to the author it must be stated that he protests at length (pp. 282-285) against the term, *sweating system*, and that he would insist upon something like an accurate translation of the Italian title. He holds that the sweating system is found out-of-doors, in factories, in mines, "whenever a poorly-paid laborer is forced to work long hours in unsanitary places."

of productive effort in modern industry, not a mere survival or an excrescence; and he believes also that it has elements, or at the least possibilities, of great good. Of course, he finds the sweating system all over the world; and, of course, he finds extremely hard conditions of life for the workers, great distress for the first sufferers and great peril, social as well as physical, for other classes. The causes of these sad and serious conditions are many: simplicity of tasks and consequent lack of training and need for training in the workers, the extreme division of labor, the very sharp competition among employers and among workers, the practices of contracting and sub-contracting, lack of knowledge and conscience in society at large, unwise charity, intemperance, the introduction of machinery, and so on. But chief among the many causes is counted the absence of organization among the workers.

To match and counteract the many causes of evil there are and must be many remedies. Quite in harmony with the teaching as to causes is a steadfast insistence that only the organization of the workers, with its equalization of bargaining or fighting strength as between employer and employed, can be a full and permanent remedy. Other measures, of sanitation, education, coöperation, and so on, through a score or more, have their merits, small or great, probable or certain; but only the organization of the workers can assure a permanent relief.

But home workers are not organized. Repeated and earnest efforts have failed to effect organizations of more than local and trivial importance here and there. The workers are too poor, too ignorant, too weak, too little in touch with one another, too much crushed, too hopeless; and all these unhappy conditions are due, in last analysis, to low wages. Only better pay can cure. Employers will not increase wages voluntarily; they cannot without endangering their own positions. The pressure of consumers and of public opinion can accomplish nothing really worth while. The labor laws of a hundred years have brought no relief to home workers. Only the direct compulsion of the state, through

minimum wage laws, can start and support a train of thoroly effective forces. This is only a temporary expedient, to be abandoned when labor organizations have enabled the workers to safeguard their own interests; but for now it is the only remedy (415), the indispensable basis of all other helpful action (416).

So far the argument has progressed up to the middle of the book. Thenceforward the author passes to the theme nearest his heart, the minimum wage law, for which he continues to plead with unwavering zeal and with never a brief doubt. Having established his fundamental principle, that state action is justified in any form and at any time when it gives fair promise of doing good (371-398), he gives his theory of the minimum wage law (399-417) and takes up in turn thirteen objections commonly advanced (417-448, 483-498). A great deal of attention is given to the proposals of international congresses (448-478) and the demands of various national bodies (498-510). A large part of the book is given to the provisions and the effects of laws passed in America (533-551), Australasia (551-591), the United Kingdom (591-635), Germany (635-660) and minor countries of Europe, and to bills pending in Austria (664-669), Belgium (669-681), France (681-712), and other lands.

Such, in brief summary, is the drift of the book. More or less incidentally the author declares a great many of his convictions. He is highly favorable to organized labor (333), even favoring a temporary compulsion of law to bring about organization among those not inclined to organize spontaneously (480). He is out and out opposed to the abolition of home wage work (520). He has no confidence whatever in the general beneficence of free competition (373); nor will he allow to the employer any natural right to fix the terms of employment in his own interest (332). Every proposed social policy must be judged by its promised results (440), not at all by its conformity to any general principle of assumed validity.

That the trend of the book is liberal, not to say radical, is evident. But there appear not only the commonplaces of

present-day liberalism, the complete rejection of *Laissez-faire* (371), the insistence upon the worker's right to a fair human wage (322), and the like: the author pushes into the van of liberalism, with an advocacy of full wages for mothers at child-birth, while released from work (394), the compulsory organization of labor (478), and other similar proposals, all quite in addition to his chief radicalism, the minimum wage law. He shows also an unusual frankness and vigor in proclaiming the reality of the evil in present conditions and the serious urgency of the need for a remedy (366).

The book, more than most, declares a definite and practical purpose; and in the light of this purpose it should be judged first. Both Professor Loria's laudatory preface and a number of passages in the text show a desire that the work may arouse the interest of students and the public and thus promote wise legislation for the correction of what is wrong and can be cured.

It is to be hoped and to be expected that results of just this sort will be advanced by the publication. For the evil is great. And the book has not a few merits. Unquestionably the broad plan of the work is admirable, quite natural perhaps, but truly admirable in its development of successive topics. And the plan has been developed with industry of amazing extent. Fact is added to fact, and argument follows argument as if from inexhaustible sources. In the descriptive parts one is reminded of the mountains of dark fact which Marx piled up to the condemnation of the early English factory system. The long, long hours of deadening drudgery, the scant pay, the unsanitary surroundings, the meager provisioning, the hunger, disease, and death, the blighting of childhood and youth, of manhood and womanhood, of motherhood, — these are shown with relentless perseverance for country after country. Relentless, too, is the exposure of the weakness or inadequacy of the most favored social remedies, mere palliatives, makeshifts, or worse, in the author's opinion.

The analytical, or theoretical, or argumentative passages, too, show much that is not only good but impressive. The

fundamental argument, for the minimum wage law (399–448), is strong; the chapter on the consumers' responsibilities (317–323) is very fine indeed, with passages which will not slip easily out of the memory. A score of other analyses show keenness of insight and effectiveness in exposition. And at every possible point the writer's deep feeling appears, his warm desire to lighten the woes of the suffering home-workers.

Such a book, on such a subject, cannot fail to make a lasting impression upon any person who reads it through. It cannot fail, therefore, to accomplish some part of its purpose. And yet, taken as it is and all in all, it cannot accomplish much; nor can it have a very favorable reception. There are merits in it, even beyond those already listed. But that is not enough.

Doubtless the book must impress any person who reads it through. But few will ever read it through. As the size and price of Adam Smith's great work were thought to give assurance that its disturbing influence could not be wide, so, but with better confidence, it may be predicted that Marconcini's book has a size and character, if not a price, which must limit its influence. A book of 850 royal octavo pages, and in economics at that, must be attractive indeed, in order to win and hold many readers. And it must be confessed that this big volume is not attractive at all; rather it is unattractive, almost repellant.

Some of the analytical passages run smoothly enough, and some of the descriptive ones, too. Some pages, indeed, almost reach the characteristic Italian ease and lucidity. There are passages at once clear and vigorous (491–492); some are incisive (274–275); others have real beauty, sombre (66) or bright (142). But as literature the great body of the book leaves much to be desired. There are loose and even ungrammatical (348) constructions; the latest neologisms abound, "trade-unionistica" (338), "nullatenenti" (527), "statizzazione" (757) and scores of others of like precarious standing. Rhetorical figures are mixed grotesquely (273, 454) and are even repulsive ("drinkers of human sweat," "bevitori di sudore umano" 313).

All this, perhaps, readers of economics can endure; for we have learned not to expect literary merit in the "literature" of our subject, whatever the language. But even the hardened reader of economics is repelled by the frequent recurrence of passages which are heavy and involved, loaded down with all sorts of explanatory and qualifying parentheses (*e. g.*, 245, 274, 478, 499, 622). The monotonous massing of figures, too, through some two hundred pages, page after page and ever more pages, all about the numbers of the workers, their ages and sexes, in this place and that, their hours and their pay, case after case, and trade after trade, all makes hard reading, such as the general public simply will not do. The author's hope of educating public opinion cannot be realized largely.

But, after all, it is not as literature, in anything like the special sense, that the book appears, but as science and with an appeal to scientists. The very obvious and formal arrangement of topics and sub-topics, the thousands of references in the footnotes, the appendices, in short, the whole form and spirit of the book make the guise of science. But, if it is not good literature, it certainly is not good science. Indeed, pretty nearly every quality which a scientific work ought not to have this book shows, not everywhere nor a few times only, but frequently. Once it is understood that the book is as liberal or radical as previous references have indicated, criticism of most of the specific doctrines may be omitted. Little that is substantially new is brought out. And the patience of readers need not be tried still again here with another set of individual judgments or opinions.

There are not a few analyses which most economists would pronounce either incomplete or positively erroneous, as the statement of the individual laborer's weakness in bargaining (330), the tracing of higher pay for home workers through prices, consumption, and demand for labor (420). Probably, too, the central doctrine is not as strong as the writer supposes. There is rather too much cheerful optimism as to the practical effects of minimum wage laws (487), too much

glossing of difficulties (444), too much disparagement of alternative measures. It is strange that a writer who mentions with approval the Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale (360) and the Scotch Wholesale (361), can yet pronounce coöperation, even consumers' coöperation, futile as a relief for the home workers (364). There is, however, little reason for long delay over particular doctrines; unfortunately, the book is so much lacking in scientific merit that it cannot claim the close attention of scientists.

The writer's spirit, or attitude, is not scientific. "Unheard-of greed" (315), "starvation wages" (*passim*), "simply frightful" (238), "inhuman exploitation" (630) are terms of emotion, just emotion very likely, but not science; yet these and their like abound throughout the book.

Of simple printer's errors there are half a hundred, some of them (173, 466) glaring; while uniformity in capitalizing, punctuation, and the use of characters is not maintained. The cravat appears twice in a list of products (116): "esse" is printed for "una" (196). These, in themselves, are perhaps trivial bits of carelessness; but the same carelessness is manifest throughout the book, in matters large as well as small.

What may be nothing more than simple carelessness of expression, marking carelessness of thought, abounds. "To say worker in large industry is to say organized worker" (399). Having made some computation that there are 300,000 home workers in New York City, the author adds that "conditions are the same (identiche) in the other cities of North America" (42, n.). Indeed, it may be said to be a common practice of the author to make an extreme statement, perhaps even over-stating the truth, and then add that the same conditions are found elsewhere, or generally (215, 216, 219, 233, etc.). Literally hundreds of incorrect statements might be listed. "It is computed that 65 per cent of the total demand of all the world for arms is satisfied by Belgium" (49). "In the United States the average saving for all laborers reaches \$600" (337, n.). In England since 1864 the conditions of child labor "generally have not improved" (257).

One fault of method is very serious for the scientist. While there are thousands of references to authorities in the footnotes, there are hundreds of statements in the text for which a reader would gladly have a citation of authority but finds none, statements, if true, of deep significance, statements which tax credulity. Statements of this kind even purport to be quoted verbatim (574). It is a common practice to give many references at the beginning of a discussion, even many quite definite references to particular pages, and then give nothing more. For twenty pages (607-627) the origin and provisions of the British Trade Boards Act of 1909 are discussed without a single reference.

Even for the reader braced for the dismal science there is too much massing of fragmentary data and altogether too little attempt to organize the data or to indicate the typical or the specially significant. Many, many pages indeed are filled with data which have no appreciable significance for the author's study. There are 34 pages of exposition and analysis of the Italian census of 1901, ending in the judgment that none of the data are worth much (93-127). Many scores of pages are given to tracing the remotest beginnings of labor legislation, comparing futile suggestions, summarizing debates, and contrasting forgotten proposals. Near a score of different proposals in France alone are compared and criticized point by point.

But let us have an end of these adverse criticisms. They might be continued indefinitely and into even more serious relations. The author's translations pass beyond the reasonable limits of freedom and looseness into real inaccuracies. His statements as to the provisions of laws are sometimes quite erroneous, as, *e. g.*, the Minnesota law (549) and to a less extent other American acts. Such criticisms are never pleasant to make; and certainly they are not pleasant to make against a book into which have been put so noble a spirit and so vast an amount of industry. In particular it is not pleasant, nor is it altogether comfortable, to pass unfavorably upon a book which comes with a warm commendation from Professor Loria, an Italian book at that. Only

because it behooves any man who stands in any way against Professor Loria to make the ground very solid under his feet have I felt justified in making my criticism as specific and as long as it is.

For no purpose, unless indeed for the very determined Italian reformer's local uses, can this large work displace Meny's smaller one, especially in the latter's newer edition, *Le travail à domicile. Ses misères, ses remèdes.*

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